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Article

The public legitimacy of democratic innovations: reflections on the Global Assembly

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This article discusses the legitimacy of democratic innovations based on communication practices directed to the external public. There is a movement in the field of public management toward implementing minipublics in general and specific mechanisms such as citizens' assemblies. However, a challenge arises regarding recognizing these democratic management practices as legitimate, especially by ordinary citizens not directly involved in them. We argue that the systematic existence of external communication practices justifying both the existence of these democratic innovations and their achievements and outcomes is as fundamental as the internal procedures guiding their existence. The propositions of this article are linked to an exploratory analysis of the Global Assembly, which took place in 2021 with 100 citizens from 49 countries.

Keywords: citizens' assemblies; democratic legitimacy; democratic innovations; communication; deliberative systems.

A legitimidade pública de inovações democráticas: reflexões sobre a Assembleia Global Cidadã sobre o clima

A proposta deste artigo é discutir a legitimidade de inovações democráticas a partir de práticas de comunicação direcionadas aos seus públicos externos. Há, no campo da administração pública, um movimento de implementação de minipúblicos em geral e de mecanismos específicos, como assembleias de cidadãos (*citizens' assemblies*). Um desafio que se coloca, no entanto, diz respeito ao reconhecimento dessas práticas democráticas de gestão como legítimas, principalmente por parte de cidadãos comuns não diretamente nelas envolvidos. Nosso argumento é de que a existência sistemática de práticas de comunicação externas, que justifiquem tanto a existência dessas inovações democráticas quanto as suas realizações e os seus desdobramentos, é tão fundamental quanto os procedimentos internos que balizam as suas existências. As proposições deste artigo estão vinculadas a uma análise exploratória da Assembleia Global sobre o Clima (*Global Assembly)*, ocorrida em 2021 com 100 cidadãos de 49 países.

Palavras-chave: assembleias cidadãs; legitimidade democrática; inovações democráticas; comunicação; sistemas deliberativos.

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La legitimidad pública de las innovaciones democráticas: reflexiones sobre la Global Assembly

La propuesta de este artículo es discutir la legitimidad de las innovaciones democráticas basadas en prácticas de comunicación dirigidas a sus audiencias externas. Hay un movimiento en el campo de la gestión pública hacia la implementación de minipúblicos en general, y mecanismos específicos como las asambleas de ciudadanos. Sin embargo, surge un desafío en cuanto al reconocimiento de estas prácticas de gestión democrática como legítimas, especialmente por parte de ciudadanos comunes que no están directamente involucrados en ellas. Nuestro argumento es que la existencia sistemática de prácticas de comunicación externas que justifiquen tanto la existencia de estas innovaciones democráticas como sus logros y resultados es tan fundamental como los procedimientos internos que guían su existencia. Las proposiciones de este artículo están vinculadas a un análisis exploratorio de la Asamblea Global sobre el Clima (*Global Assembly*), que tuvo lugar en 2021 con 100 ciudadanos de 49 países.
Palabras clave: asambleas ciudadanas; legitimidad democrática; innovaciones democráticas; comunicación; sistemas deliberativos.

1 INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, public administration has increasingly focused on the role of democratic innovations, often referred to in Brazil as participatory institutions, in various management processes[1]. This shift gained momentum with the advancement of an argumentative turn in public policy studies (Fischer & Forester, 1993). However, its roots run much deeper, tracing back to participatory experiments from the 1960s (Fischer & Gottweis, 2013). In Brazil, numerous studies have underscored both the potential of these democratic innovations for public administration and the need to examine their legitimacy and the challenges they may pose critically (Abers & Keck, 2006; Gurza Lavalle, 2011; Vaz & Pires, 2011; Faria & Cunha, 2014; Carvalho, Silva, Garcia & Brasil, 2015; Secchi, 2016; Paes de Paula & Keinert, 2016; Avritzer, 2017; Brasil, Carneiro, Anelli & Longuinho, 2019; Almeida, Martelli & Coelho, 2021).

One key principle of legitimacy in citizens' assemblies is the inclusion they foster. In deliberative processes, legitimacy stems from engaging citizens directly affected by critical issues, allowing them to take a stance on matters that impact their lives (Dryzek et al., 2010). A second principle of legitimacy is epistemic. Research on democratic innovations, along with major international organizations such as the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), suggests that designing institutions that enable democratic citizen participation is a promising approach to addressing complex problems (Smith, 2009; Farrell & Suiter, 2019; Dryzek et al., 2020; OECD, 2020). Empirical evidence further indicates that when ordinary citizens are given access to diverse and reliable information in a conducive environment, they can generate higher-quality proposals and recommendations for solving complex challenges (Boswell, Dean & Smith, 2023).

However, a third source of political legitimacy cannot be ensured merely by citizen inclusion or the quality of their deliberation: the broader recognition of citizens' assemblies by civil society.

[1] We acknowledge significant differences in the context and foundation of the terms *"participatory institutions"* and *"democratic innovations."* The former has become the most commonly used expression in Brazil to refer to large-scale, potentially impactful experiments and is deeply influenced by participatory understandings of democracy. *"Democratic innovations,"* on the other hand, is the most widely used term in the international literature to encompass a broad range of institutions—including mini-publics—aimed at promoting greater citizen representation in political discussions, often inspired by deliberative approaches to democracy. Despite the historical differences and influences between these concepts, we acknowledge that their agendas often overlap, and comparative analyses have been conducted, as illustrated by Mendonça (2013). For the purposes of this article, we prioritize these overlaps over the differences and choose to use the term *"democratic innovations"* due to its broader international recognition, including by the organizers and analysts of the case we are focusing on.

Without effective strategies of communication and mechanisms to connect democratic innovations to the public sphere, the legitimacy of deliberative forums and events can be significantly weakened (Parkinson, 2003; Hendriks, 2004; Chambers, 2009; Mendonça, 2013).

In this article, we explore the potential and challenges identified in the literature on democratic innovations regarding the connection between participatory experiments and the public sphere to legitimize their role in public administration. In addition to mapping key literature on the topic, we conduct an exploratory analysis of a citizens' assembly designed to foster connection and interaction with a global audience. Specifically, we examine the institutional design and communication flows of the Global Assembly of Citizens on the Climate and Ecological Crisis (Global Assembly), which in 2021 convened 100 citizens from 49 countries online to deliberate on the climate crisis.

This article contributes to a broad body of research that rejects anti-democratic tendencies and critically engages with the potential of democratic participation in contemporary governance. We argue that it is not only essential to develop theories but also to design democratic practices and mechanisms that renew political governance in response to the complex challenges of our time (Escobar & Elstub, 2019; Curato et al., 2021; Reuchamps, Vrydagh & Welp, 2023; Almeida, Martelli, Faria & Mendonça, 2024). However, we contend that democratic innovations can only achieve transformative impact when they are understood and recognized by external audiences, as emphasized in the deliberative systems literature (Mansbridge, 1999; Chambers, 2009; Parkinson & Mansbridge, 2012; Steiner, Jaramillo, Maia & Mameli, 2017; Maia, Hauber & Choucair, 2023). Only by engaging broader audiences can these institutions attain the legitimacy required for effective integration into public administration processes to be effectively incorporated into public administration processes.

The article is divided into three main sections, including this introduction and the concluding remarks. The first section briefly reviews the literature on democratic innovations and citizens' assemblies. The second section contextualizes the case of the Global Citizens' Assembly on Climate. The third section presents our analysis of the case. Drawing on the case study of the Global Assembly (GA) and engaging with the literature, we propose four key challenges for the implementation of democratic innovations: reaching actors who contribute to shaping the public agenda, convincing ordinary citizens of the legitimacy of these processes, sensitizing political elites, and fostering dialogue with oversight bodies.

2. DEMOCRATIC INNOVATIONS AND CITIZENS' ASSEMBLIES: AN OVERVIEW

Institutionalized participation is one of the most dynamic areas of deliberation research, significantly impacting public policy agendas. Some of the most well-known democratic innovations include participatory budgeting, citizens' juries, public conferences, and town hall meetings. These spaces for institutionalized participation serve as bridges, channeling public demands into the political system (Fischer & Forester, 1993; Fung & Wright, 2003; Coelho, Schattan & Nobre, 2004; Gastil, 2008). By incorporating the perspectives of citizens directly affected by public issues into decision-making and governance processes, they not only enhance the legitimacy of these initiatives (Habermas, 2022) but also contribute to strengthening the epistemic and ethical quality of the political system. This occurs, for instance, through introducing innovative solutions to complex problems and redressing injustices (Mansbridge et al., 2012).

The extensive literature on forums and mini-publics highlights that these spaces can be crucial in public administration and social debate. As Smith and Setälä (2018, p. 304) observe, these forums produce political judgments that "reflect both relevant information [present in society] and a variety of arguments and perspectives." Regarding public policy implementation, Vrydagh and Caluwaerts (2023) note that the position of citizens within these power-sharing forums significantly influences decisions to implement or revise policies. Democratic innovations can reinforce decision-makers stances or enrich, innovate, transform, or challenge them. This makes them essential tools for holding power accountable and addressing social inequalities (Vrydagh & Caluwaerts, 2023).

Summarizing these and other contributions, studies on institutionalized participation suggest that the creation and maintenance of these spaces can: i) cultivate a civic attitude among citizens by fostering public engagement in collective problem-solving; ii) promote learning about the complexity of public policies and the functioning of government institutions; iii) enhance state transparency; iv) facilitate the identification and integration of public demands from the local to the national level; v) foster dialogue between bureaucrats, public policy managers, policy users, and the legislature; vi) increase the state's receptiveness to demands and knowledge generated by civil society; and vii) strengthen connections between civil society actors and the formal political system, potentially contributing to legislative processes (Avritzer, 2002; Abers & Keck, 2006; Smith, 2009; Mendonça, 2013; Faria, 2014; Faria & Cunha, 2017; Secchi, 2016; Avritzer & Ramos, 2016; Smith & Setälä, 2018; Pogrebinschi, 2018; Escobar & Elstub, 2019; Vick & Gurza Lavalle, 2020; Curato et al., 2021; Almeida et al., 2021; Geissel, 2022).

The last two points, concerning the interaction between democratic innovations, civil society, and the state, have received particular attention in recent studies on democratic innovations. Decades of empirical research have shown that democratic innovations cannot fully realize their potential in isolation (e.g., Parkinson & Mansbridge, 2012; Almeida & Tatagiba, 2012; Faria, 2017). For them to be politically impactful, they must be embedded in broader communication networks that link these microcosms of participation to the larger discursive processes of the public sphere. Even when their institutional design adheres to rigorous normative standards and enjoys prior support from political representatives, their influence on administrators and public policy managers is largely contingent on the value and legitimacy attributed to them by civil society.

As we have argued, the public legitimacy of democratic innovations is not only a determinant of their democratic quality but also of their political effectiveness. This is why scholars such as James Fishkin and Bruce Ackerman advocate for publicizing citizen participation processes and even propose dedicating an entire day before elections to a nationwide event of deliberation involving millions of people (Ackerman & Fishkin, 2003; Fishkin & Luskin, 2006). This issue is a recurring theme within the systemic turn in deliberation studies. Many scholars emphasize the media's critical role in bridging participatory institutions and diverse publics, ensuring that democratic innovations do not remain confined to isolated deliberative spaces but instead contribute to broader political discourse (Maia, 2012; Bächtiger, Dryzek, Mansbridge & Warren, 2018; Maia et al., 2023; Wessler, 2019; Parkinson, 2003; Warren & Pearse, 2008; Mendonça, 2016; Curato & Böker, 2016; Pow, 2023).

For participatory democratic innovations to be socially legitimate and generate meaningful ethical, epistemic, and democratic gains, they must remain open to public scrutiny. This scrutiny requires that these participatory institutions not function in isolation but instead be embedded within a broader

macro-process in the public sphere (Mendonça & Cunha, 2014). The key is considering how these institutions integrate into the larger deliberative system. Within this framework, this article explores how citizens' assemblies navigate the challenge of fostering such connections on a transnational scale, focusing on the experience of the Global Assembly on the Climate and Ecological Crisis.

2.1 Citizens' assemblies

Citizens' assemblies, the specific democratic innovation we examine here, belong to a broader set of participatory practices that have gained prominence since the 1970s, including citizens' juries, planning cells, and the Brazilian public policy conferences. Like these other democratic innovations, citizens' assemblies bring people together to deliberate on public issues affecting a political community, aiming to revitalize democratic practice. In addition to promoting more democratic, creative, and equitable solutions to complex collective problems, assemblies are often regarded as an antidote to civic disengagement, political apathy, and the rise of populist, demagogic, and technocratic governance practices (Elstub & Escobar, 2019).

Although there is no universal consensus on the defining characteristics of citizens' assemblies, certain core elements stand out: the use of random selection for participant recruitment, an extended duration (rather than a one-time event), a scale large enough to enable meaningful deliberation, and a connection to decision-making bodies and processes (Curato et al., 2021; OECD, 2022). Underlying these features is the principle that any citizen within a political community—whether at the city, regional, national, or even global level—should have an equal opportunity to participate (Farrell, Suiter & Harris, 2019; Farrell & Suiter, 2019; Warren & Pearse, 2008; Cervellini, Rodrigues & Sendretti, 2024; Almeida et al., 2024). The assumption is that all citizens, given access to adequate information, engagement with experts, and opportunity for dialogue, can effectively analyze and propose solutions.

Most citizens' assemblies are comprised of between 50 and 150 participants. To ensure diverse representation, stratified random selection is often used, considering factors such as gender, race, age, region, and income (Farrell et al., 2019; Farrell & Suiter, 2019; Warren & Pearse, 2008). In in-person assemblies, participants have their accommodation, transportation, and meals covered by the organization of the process.

Typically, the initial phase of a citizens' assembly is dedicated to informing participants about the rules and the topic of discussion. In the weeks leading up to the meetings, participants receive information materials developed with expert input and presented in an accessible format. After this orientation, discussions take place in small groups, allowing all participants to express their views. These discussions alternate with plenary sessions, where group representatives summarize key points, facilitating broader deliberation and, eventually, voting. At the conclusion of the process, the assembly's resolutions may serve as recommendations for policymakers or as the foundation for broader public consultations (Goodin & Dryzek, 2008). Online versions of citizens' assemblies, mediated by digital platforms, have been tested in recent years, as in the case analyzed in this article.

One of the most well-known examples of a citizens' assembly was held in British Columbia, Canada, in 2004, where randomly selected citizens deliberated on electoral system reform (Warren & Pearse, 2008). However, Ireland has become the most prominent case in the past decade. Following the 2008 economic crisis, Ireland launched a series of citizens' assemblies beginning in 2011, which tackled

sensitive issues such as tax reform, same-sex marriage, abortion decriminalization, and constitutional amendments. The latter was conducted in a hybrid format, including 30 parliamentarians and 66 citizens (Farrell & Suiter, 2019).

While all these design elements are crucial for ensuring the democratic legitimacy of citizens' assemblies, they are insufficient. External political factors also play a critical role in determining their legitimacy and impact on civil society and government (Johnson & Gastil, 2015). One of the greatest challenges today for researchers and practitioners of citizens' assemblies is ensuring they connect with and influence public debate and decision-making processes. For example, through qualitative interviews with politicians and citizens in Ireland, Garry et al. (2022) found that political representatives tend to be skeptical of assemblies with significant decision-making powers, questioning the democratic legitimacy of random selection as a basis for authority. Meanwhile, citizens with strong ideological leanings generally support citizens' assemblies less than moderates (Rountree & Curato, 2023). These findings suggest that the public does not automatically perceive assembly decisions as legitimate simply because they result from a deliberative process.

The abovementioned situation raises important questions about the relationship between connection, impact, and legitimacy in citizens' assemblies. The permanent institutionalization of assemblies—such as those established in Eastern Belgium and Madrid (Farrell & Suiter, 2019)—is not a panacea for the challenges facing this democratic innovation. Their legitimacy among political actors depends not only on legal frameworks but also on how effectively they integrate into a broader democratic ecosystem involving political leaders, bureaucrats, social movements, and citizens at large (Rountree & Curato, 2023). In addition to embodying democratic values such as transparency, accountability, considered judgment, inclusivity, and efficiency (Smith, 2009), assemblies must also connect with the wider public and demonstrate their legitimacy to be recognized as valuable democratic institutions (Chambers, 2009). This raises a key question: what strategies and mechanisms can be developed to strengthen the interaction between democratic innovations and civil society?

Having outlined the key features of citizens' assemblies and their role in the broader debate on democratic innovations, we now turn to the case analyzed in this study: the Global Assembly on the Climate and Ecological Crisis.

3. CONNECTIONS BETWEEN ASSEMBLY AND PUBLIC SPHERE: THE CASE OF THE GLOBAL ASSEMBLY

The Global Assembly (GA), whose deliberative events occurred between October and December 2021, was a digital citizens' assembly conducted on a transnational scale. Built by a network of activists, third-sector organizations, national governments, and academics[2], the GA aimed to "give everyone on the planet a seat at the decision-making tables on the climate and ecological crisis" by creating a "global governance infrastructure" (Global Assembly Team, 2022, p. 25). Its organizers justified this initiative based on three key factors: a) a wave of 80 climate assemblies held worldwide; b) calls from academics (such as Dryzek et al., 2010) and the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) advocating for such initiatives; and c) recognition of the limitations of national assemblies in fostering the multinational understanding necessary to address the climate crisis.

[2] The founding group comprised the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation (UK Branch), the Climate Emergency Collaboration Group (CECG), the European Climate Foundation (ECF), The One Project, and the Scottish Government.

The GA was structured around three interconnected components: the Core Assembly, the Community Assemblies, and the Cultural Wave. The Core Assembly, the central component of the GA, brought together 100 randomly selected participants[3] to deliberate on the question: *"How can humanity address the climate and ecological crisis in a fair and effective way?"* (Global Assembly, 2022, p. 3). Over 12 weeks, participants engaged in 20 digital sessions, totaling 68 hours of deliberation. The main outcome of the Core Assembly was the *People's Declaration for the Sustainable Future of Planet Earth*, a set of recommendations presented at the 2021 United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP26) in Scotland. The Core Assembly further refined these recommendations in the weeks following the conference.

The Community Assemblies, the second component, consisted of smaller-scale deliberative events parallel with the Core Assembly to engage people worldwide. The GA provided financial support and a do-it-yourself toolkit for those interested in organizing their local assemblies. At least 37 Community Assemblies were held across five continents (Global Assembly, 2022).

The Cultural Wave, the third pillar, was a campaign to engage artists and cultural figures worldwide. The idea was that individuals with high visibility could amplify the GA's message, increasing public awareness and engagement with the initiative (Global Assembly, 2022).

3.1 Materials and Methods

The primary objective of this study is to map and analyze the strategies and challenges involved in the GA's efforts to engage with diverse transnational audiences. Beyond identifying the actions taken by the GA, we also examine how its organizers and members evaluated the effectiveness of its communication strategies. To achieve this, we adopted an exploratory interpretive research design (Yanow & Schwartz-Shea, 2014).

Our analysis draws on two sets of data. The primary source consists of two GA evaluation reports—one by the organizers (Global Assembly, 2022) and another by external evaluators (Curato et al., 2023). Additionally, given one of the authors' involvement in the external evaluation project, we had access to 24 in-depth interviews with GA service providers and transnational collaborators and interviews with 14 Global South participants[4].

For the interpretive analysis of these data sets, we applied qualitative categorical textual analysis using MAXQDA software (Kuckartz & Rädiker, 2019). Given the wide range of themes covered in the reports and interviews, we coded only segments that addressed GA's external communication strategies, such as websites and social media. Based on this analysis, we identified four key categories of GA communication strategies: a) engagement with transnational media; b) outreach to transnational political organizations and events; c) interaction with diverse cultural contexts in the digital transnational public sphere; and d) connections with hyperlocal communities.

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[3] According to the organizers, assembly members were selected using a descriptive sample of the global population based on geographical location, age, gender, level of education, and attitude toward climate change (Global Assembly, 2022, p. 10). While 100 citizens were initially selected, 99 actively participated in the process.

4 The interviews followed ethical protocols approved by the University of Canberra (202210374). All organizers (*core team*) and collaborators (*cluster facilitators*) were interviewed. The external evaluation team focused on interviewing 14 of GA's most vulnerable participants, from four continents in the Global South, representing race, ethnicity, gender, age and financial diversity

It is important to emphasize that the interviews served primarily to refine our interpretation of the subject rather than as a source of direct quotations. Since our analytical focus was on synthesizing overarching patterns rather than aggregating individual perspectives, we opted not to include direct excerpts from the interviews. Working with interviews does not necessarily require including direct excerpts in the text, as the final analysis can be based on an overarching interpretation of the interviews rather than a compilation of individual statements (Motta, Sarmento & Mendonça, 2024).

4. CASE STUDY: EXTERNAL COMMUNICATION IN THE GLOBAL ASSEMBLY EXPERIENCE

The documentation from GA organizers reveals the ambitious expectations for influence and political impact through the publicization of this democratic innovation. The aim was to engage diverse transnational audiences—from civil society to decision-makers—on the premise that recognition and legitimacy would increase GA's ability to shape climate crisis debates. By successfully connecting with governments and influential actors, GA could encourage them to take concrete action and foster recognition of alternative decision-making models for environmental governance. Similarly, if ordinary citizens regarded GA's deliberations as legitimate, they could be inspired to reflect on the crisis, adopt new behaviors, and participate in collective action (Global Assembly Team, 2022).

However, GA organizers knew the challenges in achieving these legitimacy claims and their potential impacts. Beyond the sheer complexity and scale of the climate crisis, they recognized that citizens' assemblies rarely attract mainstream media attention beyond specialized academic and activist circles (Global Assembly Team, 2022). Our analysis identified and examined four key political-communication strategies that varied in execution and effectiveness. Below, we explore each of these strategies in detail.

4.1 Connecting with the press and social media

The first set of strategies sought to connect GA with press outlets and establish debates on social media platforms. In terms of media outreach, GA secured coverage in 36 news publications across 11 countries, including major outlets such as *Forbes* (international), *The Guardian* (UK), *The Hindustan Times* (India), *The Helsinki Times* (Finland), and *Morocco World News* (Morocco). GA estimated that these publications had the potential to reach 238 million people, which, in terms of the equivalent value of paid advertisements, would have cost more than USD 2 million.

Demanding recognition and political legitimacy from citizens through traditional media remains a fundamental strategy in the pursuit of public legitimacy. Despite significant changes in communication ecosystems, driven by increasing platformization and audience fragmentation, mass media continue to play a central role in the search for social legitimacy by political actors and institutions (Degen, Olgemöller & Zabel, 2024). Despite losing its monopoly on political visibility, journalism remains crucial to contemporary public debate by amplifying arguments, inducing discussions, and shaping other communicative spheres (Maia, 2014). Moreover, research has shown that how media frame and describe events and institutions directly influences their legitimacy. Positive framing by the media assigns social value to an initiative, shaping its collective meaning, increasing public acceptance, and strengthening its legitimacy (Pollock & Rindova, 2003).

On the other hand, social media platforms, which might have been expected to be a promising arena for GA to claim democratic legitimacy (Morsing & Schultz, 2006), did not significantly expand its reach. Both recent studies (Besiou, Hunter & Van-Wassenhove, 2013) and GA's own experience indicate that merely having a presence and publishing content on these platforms is insufficient to capture users' attention or recognition. GA's external evaluation report (Curato et al., 2023) highlights that, although Twitter was the most-used platform, GA's profile gained only 2,225 followers, with limited engagement. On Facebook, despite frequent posts, interaction remained low, possibly reflecting a disconnect between the assembly's broad, general content and the more localized interests of users. GA's Instagram presence was even less successful, with only 725 followers and 70 posts at the time of the reports. This result may be linked to insufficient investment in platform-specific visual content.

4.2 Connecting with Transnational Events

Another of GA's communication strategies in its quest for legitimacy was establishing connections with large-scale events focused on climate governance. This strategy is particularly significant because such events can reshape attention structures by disrupting the continuity of ongoing debates. In doing so, they create moments of openness that influence public discourse, reframe possibilities for discussion in the public sphere, and facilitate connections and interactions that might not otherwise occur (Glynn, 2015; França, 2012; Tavares, 2010). Moreover, securing space at major events can serve as an implicit endorsement, signaling relevance and legitimacy in the eyes of event organizers, thereby increasing opportunities to be heard by influential actors and potentially shaping their agendas.

In 2022, GA organizers and participating citizens attended key climate governance events, including UNEA-5 in Kenya, Stockholm+50 in Sweden, and Peace One Day Climate Action Live online. However, the most critical event was COP-26 in November 2021. GA representatives participated in two events within the Green Zone, a space open to civil society and activists, and five events within the Blue Zone, the forum for formal negotiations between governments and major institutions.

In the Green Zone, the strategy centered on placing GA citizens, their voices, and their experiences at the forefront, albeit virtually. The goal was to highlight the democratic value that the GA conferred upon its participants and to demonstrate the assembly's deliberative process in action. Through personal narratives of the participatory journey and the presentation of the final declaration, participants illustrated the potential of citizens' assemblies to enable collective problem-solving for complex challenges (Global Assembly Team, 2022).

A different approach was taken in the Blue Zone, where the audience consisted primarily of policymakers and experts. Here, GA organizers led most of the presentations, shifting the focus from experiential narratives to discussing the assembly's normative and technical dimensions. In this setting, the demand for legitimacy was addressed through arguments that framed GA within established governance and institutional frameworks, emphasizing its potential contributions to policy processes (Global Assembly Team, 2022).

By securing a presence in transnational forums, GA reinforced its claim to external democratic legitimacy—an essential factor for any future iteration of the initiative. This presence was also instrumental in advancing the campaign for GA to become a permanent body within climate governance.

4.3 Cultural performances as connection strategies

Cultural Wave, GA's other political-communication strategy, was designed to engage artists and cultural influencers worldwide, using popular culture as a vehicle for communication. The initiative sought to expand the Assembly's reach by harnessing artistic expression to translate its themes into creative and emotionally resonant forms. The initial call for artists and content creators involved community leaders from 17 countries (Global Assembly, 2022). Following this, the GA team issued global invitations through social media, e-mail lists, and physical flyers, encouraging artists and influencers to participate in co-creation sessions. As a result, individuals and collectives from 22 countries developed diverse artistic responses to GA's themes. Community-based art projects emerged, including murals on buildings in South Africa, workshops and art installations in the Philippines, exhibitions in Australia, mosaics in China, and poetry by artists in the Democratic Republic of Congo, all aimed at connecting the public with the Assembly's messages.

Recent studies on deliberative democracy emphasize the importance of expanding political communication repertoires beyond verbal argumentation. In this context, art emerges as a powerful language capable of sensitizing the public to collective issues, shifting perceptions in ways that conventional discursive approaches often fail to achieve (Mendonça, Ercan & Asenbaum, 2022). Additionally, research on social movements highlights the role of artistic expression in increasing visibility, recognition, and legitimacy. For example, the use of artistic repertoires in protests has proven to be an effective strategy for attracting attention and mobilizing diverse audiences (Veloso, 2022).

However, despite the participation of well-known cultural figures such as Brian Eno and Mark Rylance, GA's artistic activities remained largely localized and short-lived, falling short of the mass international engagement that organizers had envisioned. The GA team attributed these limitations primarily to a lack of resources, which constrained their ability to scale the initiative to a global level (Global Assembly Team, 2022).

In an interview, one of GA's communication coordinators explained that "the project was so big, and there really wasn't enough budget," which limited the ability to hire experienced professionals and develop large-scale engagement campaigns. Another member of the communications team acknowledged in an interview that the priority was ensuring the integrity and legitimacy of GA's internal deliberative processes, sometimes at the expense of pursuing greater external visibility. According to him, with "more time and more resources," a robust and decentralized team could have coordinated efforts so that a mural in South Africa or an art installation in the Philippines would have been framed as significant global events.

4.4 Connecting with hyperlocal communities and contexts

Another strategy GA adopted to connect with communities and ordinary citizens was the implementation of community assemblies organized in different regions by local leaders ("community hosts") and Core Assembly participants. To facilitate this initiative, the GA team provided financial resources—$500 per assembly—along with training, learning packages, and informational materials so that anyone in the world could organize a "mini-assembly" in their community.

In addition, GA developed a special spokesperson training course for community leaders and assembly members, offering "practical advice on media appearances and activities" (Global Assembly Team, 2022, p. 224). In partnership with local video producers, the GA communications team also recorded a series of mini-documentaries on the lives of Core Assembly members from countries such as Yemen, Ivory Coast, Thailand, China, and Brazil.

One of the challenges posed by Lafont (2020) regarding mini-publics is the need to create a foundation that strengthens the links and sense of connection between citizens and between them and the spheres responsible for decision-making, implementing, and evaluating public policies. The way forward would be reinforcing practices and processes that make these bridges more solid and lasting. Hence, the importance of communication practices as a structuring axis for the legitimacy of these deliberative forums—practices that reinforce, with citizens, the importance of these arenas and their connection to their daily lives and that also allow not only the final results but the full range of arguments circulating within these forums to be translated and made accessible to citizens more broadly (Dryzek et al., 2020).

Decentralization through local community assemblies seems promising for reaching more people worldwide—people who could help spread awareness of the project's importance and value. However, according to interviewees, GA did not offer communication materials or adaptable plans suited to different contexts. Despite operating within the COVID-19 pandemic, GA did not seek to address or incorporate this issue into its approach. Community leaders in Latin America reported that the pandemic ended up "competing" for the attention of regional media and political actors, who prioritized other issues over climate deliberations. GA was not a priority on the agenda at that time.

The lack of a dedicated GA communications team left community leaders overwhelmed, as they had to contextualize, translate, and disseminate global and local events independently. As a result, there were significant differences in the ability of these leaders to engage government officials or secure local media coverage. This disparity can be observed in the experience of two Latin American participants from the same country, with similar ages and economic conditions. With the support of an engaged community leader, one was nominated for and won a local award as "Woman of the Year" for her involvement in GA. Along with receiving media coverage and sharing her experience in the press, she was invited to meet with the mayor, where she presented GA's findings and recommendations. The other participant, lacking similar support, could only share information about the assembly within her family and workplace. Reflecting on this disconnect, she remarked: "A world forum needs to be shown on television. It should show that there is an assembly about this (the climate crisis). But we don't see that. As I said, we know it's happened, but the people, the public...".

Thus, although GA organizers were committed to legitimizing the initiative at transnational events, the responsibility for establishing local connections and interacting with actors at the community level ultimately fell to community leaders and participants themselves.

5. FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Citizens' assemblies are a powerful tool for decision-making on complex issues, involving ordinary citizens in a democratic manner, in a world increasingly shaped by challenges and technocratic management trends. As such, they offer an alternative to epistocratic solutions (Brennan, 2016).

While it is important to remain critical of their limitations (Elstub & Escobar, 2019), we cannot ignore the optimism that recent evaluations of these initiatives provide. Research evidence, for example, suggests that non-participants tend to have greater trust in decisions made by assemblies of ordinary citizens than in those made by political managers, reinforcing the legitimacy of citizen deliberation in democratic governance.

Taking the GA as a reference point, citizens' assemblies can be understood as part of a discursive ecology structured around three interrelated dimensions. First, there is an internal discursive dimension concerning the exchange of reasons within the forum, the formation of solutions to the issues analyzed, and the development of recommendations. Second, there is an external discursive dimension, initially shaped by public demands that guide the formation of the assembly. Once deliberation concludes, this dimension feeds into decision-making by those who initiated the process, whether through policy implementation, referendums, or other institutional mechanisms. Third, there is a horizontal discursive dimension, which is not always present in democratic innovations but was observed to some extent in GA. This dimension links the forum to broader society, ensuring its public legitimacy through sustained interaction with external audiences.

This highlights a fourfold communication challenge for the legitimacy of democratic innovations. First, it is essential to promote engagement with agenda-setters—not only in traditional media but also among digital influencers and artists—who can amplify democratic innovations beyond niche audiences. Second, the legitimacy of the process must be built among ordinary citizens, ensuring that they see these assemblies as meaningful and trustworthy. Third, rather than simply informing political elites, efforts should be made to sensitize them to the fact that such initiatives are not intended to replace political representation but to complement and enrich it. Finally, in some cases, it is necessary to convince control institutions, such as the judiciary or legislative institutions, of the constitutionality and legitimacy of these participatory mechanisms. In short, effective communication requires engaging with society, the state, the media, and influential figures within the broader communications ecosystem.

Ultimately, we emphasize that the design of democratic innovations—extensively studied to advance more participatory governance—is incomplete if it does not incorporate these communicational dimensions. Ignoring these aspects not only weakens the legitimacy of the procedures and decisions adopted within specific democratic innovations but also undermines the broader project of integrating such mechanisms into democratic governance on an ongoing basis. The legitimacy of democratic innovations does not end with the fair selection of participants or the procedures guiding deliberation within the assembly. It remains open-ended, contingent on the ability of their advocates to engage the broader political community in discussions about their roles and significance. If participatory governance is to be truly democratic, it must be supported by structured communicative processes that extend beyond isolated forums and actively involve a wider democratic public.

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DATA AVAILABILITY

The data used in this research was generated by Lucas Veloso with the *Global Citizens' Assembly Network* (GloCAN) team and is available in the final reports and the 'External Evaluation Report' of the Global Assembly, which can be accessed at: https://globalassembly.org/report

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